

Event Report



Ladies and Gentlemen of the 1860s Conference *Lisa A. Ashton*

Civil War era fashions were much in evidence at a recent conference on 1860's clothing. A costumer who specializes in the period shares some highlights.

I attended the 17th annual "[Ladies & Gentlemen of the 1860's](#)" conference in Camp Hill, PA (very near Harrisburg and Gettysburg). from March 3-6, 2011. The conference, sponsored by the *Genteel Arts Academy*, promotes learning about the clothing and cultures of the 1860s Civil War era.

I learned a lot in an intensely short time, some of it at the workshops/seminars, and some of it just from talking to other attendees and a few of the dealers. The instructors here really knew their topics, and were fabulous speakers and teachers.

Day 1 (Thursday) was devoted to pre-conference workshops. I went to a morning workshop about "Perfecting Your Patterns," where the leader actually had us learn to make a perfect paper pattern out of a messy muslin. I finally really learned and practiced

how to "true" and "walk" a pattern, and also learned how and why to use a french curve to make my patterns much easier to use.

This is going to change the way I make and store my patterns, since I mostly make my own these days. Actually practicing the techniques using a 1/3 scale 1860's bodice pattern (which is what I've been doing for months now) really engraved it into my memory.

The second workshop on Thursday afternoon was on "Making an Authentic 1860's sewing Chatelaine." It taught the technique of weaving silk ribbon through 5/8" metal rings, and making the little accessories that go on it, just like the



1860's Chatelaine, a sewing tool notion that could be worn tied around the waist or around the shoulders.

several authentic ones the instructor had for display, and that we were actually allowed to touch. The kit for the workshop was only \$16, and included everything except a needle and thread.

The ribbon and ring weaving procedure was easily learned in about 45 minutes (with a few false starts for everyone) making up the "belt" part of the chatelaine. Then we spent time making the strawberry shaped pincushion, and the square pillow shaped needle holder. I found a very cute little bird shaped sewing scissors at home, that I will also tie on to it, although a mini scissors was included in the kit. There are some other *wonderful* little accessories that I may be able to find, to add to my chatelaine. I am looking forward to actually wearing it as part of my costume. Since I now have a photo of the original ones, they will also be useful as documentation.

Both workshops were pretty concentrated, and the speakers were enthusiastic and extremely knowledgeable.

After wearing my newly-made day dress to the chatelaine workshop, I was happy just to wear street clothes to the welcome reception. People were quite friendly, and there were a few "ice-breaking" sorts of questionnaires being passed around. People were also really glad to see friends from prior conferences, of course.

Day 2 (Friday) was also devoted to pre-conference workshops. My first was "I Shall Endeavor to Write It Down-- Researching the Civil War," and the speaker was *amazing*. His name is Wayne Motts and he is the Historian for the Local County historical Society at Gettysburg. I think he knows as much or more about Civil War as anyone.

Wayne talked about researching in a way that really made it personal. He went around the room (there were maybe 15 or 20 people attending this) and wrote down all of our names and what we were particularly interested in researching about the period. For me, of course, that was two fold: both about Sullivan and Sarah Ballou, and finding out more about my vintage photos and artifacts that I collect from flea markets. I never realized that doing historical research involved following up so many sources to uncover a primary source.

Friday afternoon was full of interest. First, their Marketplace opened, and I was able to talk to someone who does traditional forms of hair jewelry. She was very interested in a piece someone bought for me, and also in the two pieces that I acquired last summer at the flea market. They are even more precious to me now that I know how to outfit and wear the piece that someone bought for me. It's missing the fob or charm, but I have the perfect piece for it that I inherited from my mother's jewelry and never knew what it was (a gold weight with engraving on the bottom).

I bought some hard-to-find patterns for headpieces, another pair of stockings, and a decent historical pattern for the coat, or *paletot*, that is right for the period. I also bought a new chemise pattern that I like much better than the chemise I have, so that will look better-made too!

I found several inexpensive books, as well. One I bought as a pictorial overview of the fashions and accessories of the period, and another (all photos) because there was one of an 1862 woman in it, that looked *exactly* like the dress I made to portray Sarah Ballou. I mean, it could have been me, in that photo. Eerie.

My final workshop on Friday was called "Identifying Victorian Jewelry." The woman who spoke had an amazing knowledge of the subject, and she brought several hundred various pieces of jewelry that were laid out and we were allowed to pick up and examine!!! She had everything from earring with tiny photographs inside to patriotic brooches, to mosaic work, to "lava cameos" to fakes of the period and later.

I also found out, that the larger of my hair brooches (the ones with the missing part of the clasp) probably dates to as early as 1850 (which was fantastic), and the smaller one is clearly 1860's. It was informative and especially wonderful to be able to look at many pieces very closely, and really start to understand how to look at pieces when I am considering buying them so I'll know what and when they are.

That evening, the conference officially started with a talk about patriotism of the time, and how is manifested itself. I skipped another talk about "Living History and Reenacting" since I'm not so much into that, and I was very tired. It was a intense first two days.

Day 3 (Saturday) was the start of the more "academic" program. There were two parallel tracks of lectures. I chose the one that was more about culture and dress. There were also exhibits of actual original dresses and other clothing articles. I spent some time in there and we were actually allowed to photograph things!

The exhibit included chemises with lots of hand whitework (gorgeous), bonnets, and children's clothes. The authentic chemises of the period were astounding for the fine white-on-white needlework in the chemises--interesting, if there are tucks, they are vertical and on the yoke, *not* on the body or hem area of the garment, as we are so used to seeing for decorative elements.



Ballgown bodice from the 1860's, one of the displays brought by attendees. with handmade lace insertions

The first talk on Saturday was about "transforming" or "convertible" dresses--i.e. adding a *fichu* or *peleline* or *bertha*, or even a second matching bodice, to make the outfit do double duty and be a different look. We all do this now, and they did it then too. The second talk was about the quilt collection at the Museum of the Confederacy. Being a quilter myself, it was quite fascinating. They have several quilts there that were actually made by the First Lady, wife of Jefferson Davis. Some of the quilts have a very interesting provenance.

For the most part, everyone wore regular clothes to attend the workshops and lectures. My wearing an 1860's day dress to a workshop was unusual, but fun. The opening of the main lectures was punctuated by a presentation where all the speakers and workshop leaders had been sent a package of fabric in advance with the instructions to, "Make a dress of the period." It was interesting to see each speaker present their dress (the men are sent Vest fabric), and how different they were and what the similarities were as well.

While I was listening to the talks, I was making a collar and cuffs for the bodice I planned to wear that evening to the dinner and ball. I was able to get them done with the little bit of lace sewn into the seam, and I tacked them on when I went back to the room. I skipped the afternoon talks – I am never good at sitting through that stuff all day, even at a professional conference.



The new bodice (a red and grey plaid wool--very fine, light, and soft) is very tailored, with the points in the front and the "swallowtail" back. I'm really proud of the piping on it (piping all those points was challenging). It fit perfectly, and has some of my vintage glass buttons on it. It was a good choice, although very different from what else I saw. It has essentially no decoration to it. I wore it with the pale grey wool skirt. Everything fit and went together well.

The ball and dinner were quite nice. There was assigned table seating for the dinner, which is a Victorian custom, and it was really easy to talk to my table companions. The dinner itself was nothing special, but the reception!! Almost all the

women dressed in 1860's dress and oh my! what dresses they were--not all ball dresses, so I needn't have been intimidated, but they were quite wonderful, colorful and feminine.

Day 4 (Sunday) had two talks. I stayed for the first talk about the Industrial Age, when they started to make crinolines and hoops and corset bones out of steel, and they first made machine printed fabrics. I found it both interesting and useful. The whole weekend had been really intense, so I decided to call it a day after that.

Next year, the conference will run from March 1-4 in Harrisburg Pennsylvania. See the Genteel Arts Academy [web site](#) for details. I'm already thinking about attending – that is, if I recover from this year's conference by then!

Lisa A. Ashton is a Science Fiction & Fantasy and historical costumer who started costuming after attending Noreascon in 1989. Over 20 years later, she is still trying to design and build that perfect costume that will make people gasp in wonder. Other passions include beading, hunting, stamp collecting, gardening and canning, and collecting authentic Victorian photographs to study fashion history. As a Physician Assistant in Emergency Medicine for the last 25 years, she has had many opportunities to hone her sewing skills on her patients. Lisa is Program Director for Costume-Cons 29 and 30. Visit her [web site](#) (still under construction). Her article, "Sullivan Ballou's Farewell," appears in this issue.